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### Deposited in DRO:

26 April 2018

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Yao, Joanne (2018) 'Conquest from barbarism' : the Danube Commission, international order and the control of nature as a standard of civilization.', *European journal of international relations*. .

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066118768379>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

### Additional information:

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# **“Conquest from Barbarism”: The Danube Commission, International Order, and the Control of Nature as a Standard of Civilization**

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## **Abstract:**

In recent years, International Relations scholarship has looked back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a watershed epoch for the formation of the current international order and the development of ‘Standards of Civilization’ to legitimate that order. However, limited attention has been paid to the role played by society’s relationship with the natural world in constructing these civilizational standards. This article argues that the control and exploitation of nature as a Standard of Civilization developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to constitute membership in a civilized European international society. The standard dictated that civilized polities must both demonstrate internal territorial control and uphold external obligations towards other actors. In examining 19<sup>th</sup> century political contestations over the Danube River as a natural highway between Europe and the near periphery, I demonstrate that in the eyes of Western Europe, Russia failed to uphold the taming of nature as a civilizational standard, contributing to the delegitimization of its authority over the Danube. In its place, the Western Powers following the Crimean War created an international commission to manage the Danube delta—a rational and scientific body to rectify the troublesome absence of civilized authority. These civilizational assumptions underpin the 1856 Danube Commission as an early international organization, and through its success, continue to have implications for today’s international order.

**Keywords:** international order, international organizations, international history, Standards of Civilization, environment

Available online first at the *European Journal of International Relations*:  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1354066118768379>

In recent years, International Relations scholarship has looked back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a watershed epoch for the development of the current international order (Branch, 2011; Mitzen, 2013; Buzan and Lawson, 2015). One avenue of research on the Standards of Civilization has shed light on the ideational framework behind 19<sup>th</sup> century legitimation mechanism that separated civilized and noncivilized societies and created an international order with Western Europe as its epicenter (Buzan, 2004; Suzuki, 2009). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the language of Standards of Civilization has been subsumed under the more egalitarian language of sovereignty and international law, the legacy of civilizational standards continues to shape our notions of legitimate statehood (Donnelly, 1998; Bowden, 2004). In the growing scholarship on the Standards of Civilization, however, limited attention has been paid to the role society’s relationship with the natural world played in constructing these standards.

In this article, I demonstrate how the control of nature as a civilizational standard developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and become embedded in assumptions that underpinned early international governance. The control of nature as an indicator of civilizational advancement emerged out of Enlightenment faith in the power of science to master nature for social progress. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this scientific confidence combined with civilizational discourses to measure how ‘civilized’ a polity was based on its ability to dominate and exploit nature. The standard operated through dual mechanisms in both a polity’s ability to demonstrate internal territorial control and uphold external obligations towards other civilized actors. One prominent example showcasing the application of both sides of this standard was the contestation between Britain and Russia over control of the Danube delta. Controlling the Danube was both a measure of Russia’s domestic capacity and its moral will and civilizational commitments towards European international society. Russia’s failure to discipline the river delegitimized Russian control over the Danube and prompted the 1856 Paris Peace Conference to create the Danube Commission—an international body exercising effective territorial control over the Danube’s mouth. Without a civilized power capable of controlling the river, this early international organization was given the responsibility to domesticate nature and render the Danube conducive to international commerce. Debates about Russia’s civilizational status have colored European attitudes towards its eastern neighbor since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Neumann, 2008; Stivachtis, 2015) and the Danube constituted a tangible link between Europe and Russia. Focusing on Russia’s civilizational status in the 19<sup>th</sup> century allows us to highlights the ideational and political relations between nature, civilization and international order.

In addition, by framing the control of nature as a civilizational standard in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this work calls attention to the importance of interrogating society’s ideational and political relationship with the natural world in order to understand the globalization of international society. In the past decade, IR scholarship has challenged Eurocentric understandings of the spread of international society outwards, thus contributing a necessary corrective to traditional, unidirectional accounts of the advancement of European international order (Towns, 2009; Zarakol, 2011; Keene, 2014; Reus-Smit and Dunne, 2017). These works have focused on the context-specific and uneven interactions between a far-from-homogenous West, and the complex socio-cultural landscapes they encountered, to construct a more nuanced picture of how shifting notions of civilization and progress influenced the 19<sup>th</sup> century emergence and globalization of international order.

However, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the importance of geographic encounters in the creation of civilizational standards. Similar to its encounters with foreign societies, the West’s encounters with foreign spaces also produced context-specific and power-laden ideational frames that directly shaped the evolving international political order. Of course, physical geographies cannot be entirely separated from

the societies that inhabit them, but this article stresses the importance of ideational engagement with space as an underexamined source of political legitimacy and civilizational benchmarking. I will argue, through a detailed examination of Western European's involvement with the Danube River in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, that the control of nature featured prominently in developing Western ideas about civilization and progress. These ideas influenced contestation over territorial control between Western Europe and Russia and was embedded in evolving civilizational discourses concerning the Black Sea region. It was this understanding of the Danube River as a physical and metaphysical conduit of civilization from the heart of Europe to the periphery that gave a moral impetus to Western Europe's geopolitical interest in the Danube delta.

Western European conceptualizations of the far reaches of the Danube River not only influenced notions of civilizational standards and territoriality, but also affected the international institutional outcomes—and by extension the international order—that resulted from the Crimean War. I contend that the control of nature as a civilizational standard was one of the driving assumption behind the establishment of the Danube Commission, an early international organization<sup>1</sup> and a prototype for international governance. In shaping institutional assumptions, these 19<sup>th</sup> century standards governing the accepted and 'civilized' relationship between the state and nature continue to shape the fraught interactions between political sovereignty and the environmental in today's international order. As Timothy Mitchell astutely observed 'We have entered the twenty-first century still divided by a way of thinking inherited from the nineteenth' (2002: 1). Indeed, into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the potential for cooperation over international challenges such as climate change and polar melt continues to face the sovereignty roadblock as a state's legitimacy as a political actor continues to depend on its ability to exercise exclusive control over territory and exploit its resources. Hence, recognizing the control of nature as a civilizational standard that emerged from European enlightenment notions of societal progress allows us to understand the persistence of certain problematic ideational frames, not only in the construction of civilizational standards in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but in revealing the centrality of society's relationship with nature in the foundational assumptions of International Relations.

### **Standards of Civilization and International Order**

The Standards of Civilizations literature investigates the ideational scaffolding that structures international order. Harkening back to 19<sup>th</sup> century European justifications for colonialism and empire, many scholars observe continuities in today's international politics where unspoken differentiations between civilized and non-civilized still legitimize order in international society. The classical Standards of Civilization has its origins in 19<sup>th</sup> century legal benchmarks that distinguished civilized states—which were afforded full rights and recognition under international law—from uncivilized societies. This idea of separation was shaped by influential political theorists including John Stuart Mill.<sup>2</sup> Standards included basic institutions of

government, the organized capacity for self-defense, published legal codes and domestic rule of law, and recognition of international law (Bowden, 2014: 617).

In past decades, the Standards of Civilization has experienced a rebirth through the universalist aspirations of liberal theorists hoping to shed the concept's 'darker' colonial implications. In doing so, Jack Donnelly argues that the moral principles and obligations constraining state action that characterize full membership in the society of states represented 'a less sinister...side of the classic standard of civilizations' (1998: 5). Following World War II, these 'progressive' and 'inclusive' aspects were codified into international human rights law as a 'liberal standard of legitimacy' (1998: 14). Others have followed Donnelly in highlighting the progressive, liberal-democratic benchmarks that might be recovered from 19<sup>th</sup> century Standards of Civilization to inform a new era of international peace and security (Fidler, 2000; Mozaffari, 2001). Critics have condemned this move as eliding important ideational links between historical and current international practices and upholding a problematic Enlightenment teleology about the spread of norms in international society (Bowden, 2004). However, despite past and present controversies, the Standards of Civilization remains an important analytical tool in examining states' acceptance into and the expansion of a Western normative order (Zhang, 1991; Stivachtis, 2008).

English School discussion of the concept focuses on the expansion of international society from Europe outwards as new members sought to join the club of civilized, sovereign states (Bull and Watson, 1984; Gong, 1984). In their seminal volume, Bull and Watson distinguish an international society from a system by stressing the common rules and institutions that govern relations in a society. Through expansion, Europe unified the global not only through economic and technological innovations, but through the establishment of a new order characterized by domestic territorial sovereignty and judicial equality between states (Bull and Watson, 1984: 23-4). This account, the authors claim, is Eurocentric because the historical record itself is Eurocentric. Many viewed this work as a needed corrective to the English School's lack of engagement with colonialization and imperialism. More recently, scholars have investigated the continuities of 19<sup>th</sup> century civilizational standards in 21<sup>st</sup> century international politics. Rather than viewing a historical break in 1945 where a hierarchical and imperial international order transformed into a post-war order based on equitable liberal norms, the realization that Standards of Civilization continue to underpin international order helps to 'highlight the continuity of the practice' in today's international society (Buzan, 2014: 577). These continuities linger in discourses surrounding 'failed states', 'structural adjustments' and 'good governance' that separate states worthy of Western aid or trade partnerships from those that are not (Anghie, 1999; Gruffydd Jones, 2013).

Critiques of the original English School framework abound, and the Standards of Civilizations debate has been used as a critical tool to rethink the normative assumptions and problematic teleology underlying the expansion of European international society and its institutions. Some have sought to correct the debate's Eurocentric triumphalism with a more nuanced consideration of how non-Western states approached the standards set by European society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its often-problematic implications for peace and stability (Suzuki, 2009; Zarakol, 2011). Other investigations have concentrated on alternative international orders beyond the modern European one, tempering Western exceptionalism (Philips and Sharman, 2016; Crawford, 2017). In his critique, Keene argues that the expansion model should be replaced with one of stratification focusing on the relational sociology of historical encounters rather than institutional spread from the West outwards (2014: 653-4). This corrective would highlight the complex patterns of association between Western and non-Western agents that dispels the unidirectional expansion model of civilizational standards. In their reboot of Bull and Watson's work, Christian Reus-Smit and Tim Dunne also question the linearity and Eurocentrism of the 'expansion' of international society, preferring to use the term 'globalization' to describe ongoing processes that facilitates the spread of both sovereign states as an institution and a certain set of social relationships between states (2017: 5-6). In this reconceptualization, the spread of international society goes beyond the unidirectional expansion of legal and institutional norms from Europe outwards. It captures an uneven, power-laden process of often violent domination that spread institutions and social practices—institutions and practices that evolved and shifted as they interacted with other societies beyond Europe.

Further, recent literature considering civilizational standards has critiqued 'mainstream' constructivist research, particularly for its penchant for investigating 'good' norms. Indeed, as Suzuki convincingly demonstrates, Japan's late-19<sup>th</sup> century turn towards imperialism corresponds with its desire to conform to Western behavioral norms and join the European club of Great Powers (2009). In her work on the status of women, Ann Towns confronts accounts of norm diffusion that treat the political empowerment of women as a hallmark of civilizational advancement spreading from the West outward. Rather, Towns contends, it was the political exclusion of women that marked civilized from uncivilized societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a trend that has now been reversed. In doing so, she stresses the malleability of definitions of civilization (2009: 684). Ayşe Zarakol's work on stigmatization (2011; 2014) similarly highlights the problematic nature of the norms cycle argument that separate 'good' norm compliance in the West with 'bad' norm non-compliance elsewhere, without considering how non-compliance does not necessarily equate to failed internalization. In fact, internalized norms could lead to shame and stigmatization rather than compliance and socialization. Hence, not only do constructivists fail to produce causal explanations, but Zarakol charges that they 'reproduce existing hierarchies in the international system' (2014: 313).

Similarly, I view the Standards of Civilization as a useful instrument in uncovering the ideational scaffold behind the current international order—bedrock assumptions that are too often left unexplored by IR accounts of normative and institutional expansion. In contributing to this body of work, I focus on the control of nature as one of the legitimizing ideas that constituted the 19<sup>th</sup> century international order, dividing the civilized from the noncivilized other. In examining the establishment of the 1856 Danube Commission, I chart how the control of nature became embedded in international institutions and practices.

International organizations did not begin with the League of Nations; rather, the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the development of internationalism as an idea and as functional organizations to govern an increasingly interconnected world (Murphy, 1994; Charnovitz, 1997; Mazower, 2012; Buzan and Lawson, 2015). While the Danube Commission's inception seemed inconsequential as a technical body in a river delta on the far side of Europe, by the time early-20<sup>th</sup> century writers began cataloging international bodies, the Danube Commission had taken on greater meaning as a stepping stone to international governance. Paul S Reinsch's work barely mentions the Rhine Commission while it highlights the Danube Commission in that 'it is guaranteed complete independence from undue interference on the part of any riparian states' (1911: 74). Leonard Woolf devoted an entire third chapter in his *International Government* to the body, celebrating the Commission as the first 'international Executive' to which European powers delegated authority. Woolf lauded the Commission as a successful functional body and a model on which international government could be built (1916: 21; Wilson, 2003: 102). Historian Glen Blackburn identified the Commission as an independent force in world politics and part of 'the growing recognition of the futility of arbitrary political frontiers not based upon logical economic considerations' (1930: 1159).

As these early 20<sup>th</sup> century commentators highlighted, the Danube Commission was influential beyond transboundary river management because it was exemplary in two interrelated ways—its independence from territorial authority and its success as a functional and apolitical body. Indeed, Lyons characterized the Commission's 'quasi-sovereign powers' over its own judicial, policing and financial affairs as 'impressive' and a result of its technical successes (1963: 62)<sup>3</sup>. This functional approach underpins much of the intellectual energy behind early arguments for international governance leading to the League and United Nations (Wilson, 2003: viii). Woolf's writings influenced theorists such as David Mitrany, whose thinking on functionalism shaped European integration (Murphy, 1994: 16-17). However, as I demonstrate, the establishment of the Danube Commission as a 'functional' and 'executive' body was deeply political and rested on the control of nature as a civilizational standard that separated legitimate from illegitimate authority. Attributing the Danube Commission's success to its technocratic and apolitical activities misses

the political implications of upholding the Danube Commission as a model for international governance. The politics here shifts focus from antagonisms between states to humankind's united confrontation of an irrational natural world that stands in the way of sensible international cooperation. In essence, viewing the Commission as apolitical drains the ideological content from Scottish philosopher James Dunbar's 1780 declaration 'Let us learn to wage war with the elements, not with our own kind' (quoted in Blackbourn, 2006: 3)—a worldview validated by the success of the Danube Commission and advanced in subsequent liberal internationalist projects.

Philosopher and historians have long cautioned against the problematic practice of positioning culture and civilization in opposition to nature<sup>4</sup>. However, with few notable exceptions (Morgenthau, 1946; Bowden, 2009), this concern is largely absent from IR. While some works have highlighted environmental stewardship as a fundamental institution of international society (Buzan, 2004) or the domination of the animal as a Standard of Civilization (Cudworth and Hobden, 2014), insufficient attention has been paid to the close relationship between nature and civilization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its enduring legacy today. The ability to categorize, tame and utilize the material world remain both a demonstration of a state's legitimate domestic institutions and evidence of its legitimate relations with others. By exploring these arguments, I highlight the state's sociopolitical relationship with nature as a foundational concept animating the development of the modern international order. Understanding the importance of control over nature in the establishment of civilizational standards governing 19<sup>th</sup> century European society, and the Danube Commission as an important early organization, offers insights into why a problematic framing of nature remain so persistent in today's international society.

### **Controlling Nature as a Two-Fold Civilizational Standard**

The control of nature operated as a civilizational standard through two main mechanisms: territoriality as a process internal to a polity and international trade as an example of external obligation between polities<sup>5</sup>. First, the shift from medieval to modern notions of territoriality rested on control over nature. An international society of sovereign states constituted a uniquely modern European system of political rule; John Ruggie described it as one that 'differentiated its subject collectively into territorially defined, fixed, and mutually exclusive enclaves of legitimate dominion' (1993: 151). Much has been said on how modern statehood developed in Europe (Tilly, 1992; Teschke 2003; Branch, 2011). But by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, political authority in Europe had moved away from non-territorial and overlapping forms to linear, cartographically-bounded territorial states. Branch identifies nonterritorial authorities to include 'personal bonds of feudal ties, oaths of allegiance between monarchs and subjects, and authorities over economic or religious issues' (2011: 9). Hence, in order to become a fully-fledged member of 19<sup>th</sup> century civilized European society,



states sought to shed these older forms of authority in favor of establishing a centralized state able to wield exclusive and even control within a contiguous territory. While most emphasize control over people and processes, I maintain that territoriality does not only imply control over the population and the ability to police social behaviors. The rise of the modern territorial state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also implied a hierarchical relationship with nature—a relationship that rests on scientific arguments about Enlightenment rationality and civilizational progress.

James C. Scott's scholarship places the control of nature at the center of modern statecraft. In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott proposes that a main objective of the modern bureaucratic state is to impose legibility—through administrative standardization and simplification—on illogical nature and society so authorities might more easily control and thus profit from these resources. Rationalization projects were designed to transform local complexity into something more comprehensible to the state and therefore governable. To do so, the state adopts a high modernism ideology rooted in Enlightenment notions of progress. High modernism is 'a sweeping vision of how the benefit of technical and scientific progress might be applied' to rationalize and control nature and all human activities (Scott, 1998: 89-90). These efforts were motivated by the conviction that controlling nature would have both moral and fiscal benefits for the state, and both would lead to civilizational progress. While Scott does not specifically link these modernizing projects to international Standards of Civilization, his discussion of the moral and enlightened rationales behind tightening territorial control over unruly lands and populations directly speak to standards that developed to separate civilized from uncivilized societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century international order.

European modernization and state-building efforts exemplified how taming nature became a standard of legitimate and moral domestic territoriality. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the young Frederick the Great oversaw the construction of a twelve-mile channel on the Oder River to drain the swamps and increase agricultural acreage (Blackbourn, 2006: 10). Frederick wrote to Voltaire of the project that 'whoever improves the soil, cultivates land lying waste and drains swamps is making conquests from barbarism'. By barbarism, Frederick referred to the marshes as well as the people whom he characterized as 'sunk in ignorance and stupidity' as if the swamps had corrupted the character of the populations that inhabited it (Mauch, 2004: 13). Here, Frederick's language evokes John Locke's principle of property rights and is an Enlightenment argument of ordered rationality against the barbarism of chaos and decay. To fight this war, Frederick brought in cartographers, surveyors, engineers and statisticians to establish control over the wild world of reeds and marshes. Engineers consulted Renaissance treaties as well as the experiences of Jan Leeghwater in Holland and Cornelius Vermuyden in southern England as models of water management (Bell, 2012). Controlling the river, then, became a heroic conquest—a battle between the human mind and the irrational

and unknown as water is harnessed and domesticated for the needs of society<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, Frederick boasted that his scheme on the Oder allowed him to literally conquer provinces and add them to his domain.

The control of nature as an expression of civilizational legitimacy did not stop at Europe's border. Through imperialism, the impulse to rationalize and control nature became a global standard of territorial legitimacy. Much work in political geography has analyzed the use of cartographic science to consolidate and legitimize colonial claims (Harley, 1989; Wood, 1992; Burnett, 2000; Branch, 2012). Maps of imperial conquests at once made these territories visible to European populations, legitimated imperial rights through claims to scientific and objective knowledge and operated as a tool to facilitate further conquest. Hence, these maps were more than innocent depictions of the world; they were tools of imperial statecraft that also symbolized and mythologized the rights and obligations of civilized Europeans over less civilized peoples. These imperial cartographic enterprises rested on a certain hierarchical relationship between civilized society and nature: the ability to use scientific instruments to measure, simplify and control messy, nonlinear geographies by reducing them to grids of longitude and latitude. It is a declaration of mastery, and those unable to demonstrate this mastery lost political legitimacy over their own lands.

The second mechanism through which the control of nature operated as a 19<sup>th</sup> century civilizational standards was through the capacity to maintain reciprocal obligations with other civilized states. One prominent example of reciprocal obligations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was international agreements, as part of treaties such as the 1815 Final Act of the Congress of Vienna, which obligated riparian states to maintain Europe's water-based transnational highways for the benefit of interstate commerce. The English School has highlighted trade as a fundamental or primary institution of international society that requires states to uphold certain norms and practices (Buzan, 2004; Holsti, 2004). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, free trade became increasingly institutionalized as a collective good, reflecting an Enlightenment celebration of free trade as a bringer of civilizational advancement and moral progress (see for example Smith, 1904 [1776]; Mill, 1836). Control over international rivers was required for states to maintain the reciprocal obligations necessary to facilitate international trade.

The increase of international commerce necessitated interactions with physical geography and territoriality in two ways. First, the state must be able to harness domestic resources to increase the quantity and quality of tradable goods. Second, trade required infrastructure and rule of law to ensure that goods and services traveled in an efficient and orderly manner from one state to another. The international river was the perfect natural conduit for the spread of rational Enlightenment progress through interstate commerce. When the French Republic expanded eastward in the late-18<sup>th</sup> century, it dismantled centuries of tolls and monopolies

that hindered commerce along Europe's waterways. In a November 1792 decree, the French Republic announced that 'nature does not recognize privileged nations any more than privileged individuals' (Kaeckenbeck, 1918: 32) and the right to navigate along nature's highways ought to be free for all nations. Despite France's eventual defeat, the 1815 Congress of Vienna preserved this notion of free navigation on international rivers and adopted the principle into European law. States now had the formalized legal obligation to maintain international rivers such as the Rhine River for the benefit of global commerce. As an early focus of the European Concert's cooperative efforts, navigation along international rivers ideally illustrates how the control of nature as a civilizational standard impacted the developing international order. Civilizational discourses were particularly prominent in discussions surrounding the management of the Danube River which connected the heart of Europe with the near periphery in the Ottoman and Russian Empires.

Free trade along international rivers could not be achieved by lofty declarations alone—maintaining the river as a conduit for commerce and civilizational progress required authorities to tame often unruly rivers by straightening bends and deepening riverbeds. Safe and efficient shipping also required common navigation codes and rule of law to protect merchants and their cargo. As the next section will illustrate through the case of the Danube delta in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, states that failed to meet these obligations were portrayed as derelict in their duties and not civilized members of European international society.

### **Controlling the Danube Delta and the 1856 Danube Commission**

Despite its position among the Great Powers at Congress of Vienna, Russia 'experienced trouble maintaining its great power credentials' throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Neumann, 2008: 138), and by the Crimean War, Russia's status was in doubt. Along with other factors such as Russia's illiberal domestic institutions and its stagnant military power, this section argues that civilizational discourses over control of the Danube helped constitute shifting perceptions of Russia's international standing. First, I examine how controlling the Danube was viewed as a marker of legitimate rule—a demonstration of a political regime's ability to control territory and dominate nature for the benefit of society. Those unwilling or unable to do so had their legitimate authority questioned. The second section demonstrates how, in the decades before the 1856 Crimean War, Russian unwillingness or inability to tame the Danube delta was perceived as a failure to uphold the Standards of Civilization. This failure operated at both the internal territorial level where lack of control bred chaos and instability, and at the international level where barriers to trade stemming from navigational difficulties damaged Russia's ability to uphold international obligations.

Finally, I argue that links between the Danube and civilization went beyond mere symbolism to leave a palpable imprint on the Western European imagination. This was not a purely unidirectional story where the Danube carried civilization from enlightened Europe eastward into barbaric lands; rather, there was an uneasiness that accompanied this narrative which underpinned political efforts to tame the Danube delta. The river as a conduit for civilization can be easily reversed, and if left unchecked, uncivilized geographies at the far reaches of the river threatened to bring instability back upriver and endanger the heart of civilization. This complex understanding of the Danube River as both a conduit for European civilization to flow outwards and a potential path for chaos to flow upriver shaped the contest for control over the delta.

### *Controlling the Danube as Legitimate Authority*

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Danube was seen as a dangerous and untamed force that required constant management. These perils were expressed in two different ways. First the Danube presented physical dangers, from floods that devastated communities along its banks to navigational difficulties for those who intended to travel and trade along the river. Secondly, the river represented metaphysical dangers—the chaos that threatened to overwhelm orderly and rational civilization. Both dangers required human ingenuity and political will to overcome. Since the Roman Empire, leaders able to tame the Danube also claimed the legitimacy to rule by demonstrating their ability to protect the population from dangerous forces—both physical and moral—and to harness nature for society's benefit.

Perhaps the most treacherous section of the river for navigators was the Iron Gate or Kazan gorge, a rocky 120-kilometer stretch of limestone cliffs in the Transylvanian Alps that separated the upper and lower Danube. The name Kazan, Turkish for 'hissing kettle', describes the sound of the rushing water as the river squeezes between the jagged rocks creating dangerous eddies and whirlpools<sup>7</sup>. To circumvent this obstacle, Emperor Trajan built a road to bypass the treacherous rapids and connect the upper and lower river. It was a remarkable engineering feat that combined footpaths carved into the rock with a wooden road suspended from the cliffs. To commemorate this achievement, the Emperor installed a victorious tablet which read: 'The Emperor Caesar, son of the divine Nerva Trajan Augustus Germanicus, High Priest and for the Fourth Time Tribune, Father of the Country and for the fourth-time consul, overcame the hazards of the mountain and the river and opened this road' (Beattie, 2010: 208). Carved in stone, this inscription celebrated Trajan's victory over the river as a reflection of his political greatness and authority to rule the banks of the river—the conquest was both physical and moral showcasing Trajan's power over nature and his ability to control and overcome all barriers in his way.

Seventeen centuries later, Austrian rulers continued to frame control over the Danube as a declaration of imperial authority. Upriver from the Iron Gate along the Austrian section of the Danube, narrow gorges created intricately interlaced fluvial channels that threatened navigation. Two infamous whirlpools—the *Strudel* and *Wirbel*—gained much notoriety (Coates, 2013: 47). Nineteenth century traveler Robinson Planché described the *Wirbel*: ‘in the centre the water forms a perfect funnel, and a large branch of fir was whirling round and round in it, as if some invisible hand were stirring the natural cauldron, making it boil and bubble’ (1827: 194-5). Local legends surround both whirlpools, often blaming water spirits that demanded sacrificial victims from passing boats. This depiction of the river conjures physical as well as metaphysical dangers by envisioning evil spirits and innocent victims. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, equipped with gunpowder, Austrian Empress Maria Theresa’s engineers removed 30 cubic fathoms of rock from the riverbed to tame the *Strudel*<sup>8</sup>. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to tame the *Wirbel*, Emperor Franz Josef blasted through the Hausstein rock formation. He then mounted a plaque on the left bank that declared victory against the river: ‘Kaiser Franz Josef freed shipping from the dangers of the Donau-Wirbel by blowing up the island of Hausstein 1853-1866’ (Coates, 2013: 51). Here, Franz Josef declares himself a liberator, deriving his legitimacy to rule from the deliverance of his people from the perils of nature.

Similarly, the inability to tame nature also spoke to the lack of political legitimacy. After the Roman road disintegrated, the Iron Gate continued to hinder navigation. Before the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, passengers and freight disembarked and crossed the Iron Gates overland. Starting in the 1830s, attempts to blast through the Iron Gates met with hydrological and political resistance. In his travelogue, Adolphus Slade describes how Count Istvan Szechenyi, a local notable, attempted to blast through the reef. He was hindered by water levels, and also the Ottoman authorities who responded to his request for permission to proceed: ‘As Allah had placed the rocks there, it would be impious to remove them’<sup>9</sup> (1840: 165). Here, the Ottomans’ reluctance to assist in controlling the river put the legitimacy of their rule into question as civilizational discourses mixed with river politics to constitute the Ottomans as primitive and superstitious, unwilling to support a rational project that so self-evidently led towards commercial gain and civilizational progress.

The same civilizational standards were applied to the other empire that controlled the mouth of the Danube: Russia. As the remainder of this article will show, Russia’s unwillingness or inability to tame the Danube de-legitimized its territorial authority over the delta. This civilizational imperative operated through the dual mechanism of an internal lack of control and an external inability to meet international responsibilities. Russia’s failure to exert sovereign control over its own territory and uphold treaty obligations towards others paved the way for the 1856 Crimean War and Western Europe Powers’—and particularly Britain’s—insistence on an international commission to manage the delta after the war.

### *Commerce, Civilization and the Danube Delta*

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Danube River as a commercial highway emerged on the international agenda. One reason was technological—the introduction of steamboats helped overcome navigational difficulties along the river making the Danube a viable long-distance transport route. In 1830, the Austrian Danube Stream Navigation Company began operations between Vienna and Pressburg, and travelers celebrated the promise of steam for further economic development of the river (East, 1932: 340; Quin, 1836). The other reason that Danubian trade was propelled onto the international agenda was the ideological link made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century between free trade, peace, and civilizational advancement. Booming trade on the Danube created access to markets and the potential for vast material wealth. But this was not a simple story of interest driving foreign policy. The promotion of free trade was intimately linked with civilizational discourses. Before the House of Commons in 1842, Lord Palmerston advocated for the repeal of the Corn Laws by laying out this liberal economic vision:

Why is the earth on which we live divided into zones and climates? Why, I ask, do different countries yield different productions to people experiencing similar wants? Why are they intersected with mighty rivers – the natural highways of nations? Why are lands the most distant from each other, brought almost into contact by the very ocean which seems to divide them? Why, Sir, is it that man may be dependent upon man. It is that the exchange of commodities may be accompanied by the extension and diffusion... multiplying and confirming friendly relations. It is, that commerce may freely go forth, leading civilization with one hand, and peace with the other, to render mankind happier, wiser and better (*The Annual Register of 1842*: 40).

Here, Palmerston echoes a litany of prominent European thinkers<sup>10</sup>. His evocation of the river as the natural highway of nations not only constructs the river as a functional object of human commerce, but also naturalizes his liberal economic argument. According to Palmerston's logic, the existence of natural geographies such as rivers and oceans can only be explained by their usefulness to commerce. At the same time, commerce naturally leads to not only interdependence and wealth but wisdom, peace and ultimately civilization. Palmerston then describes this commercial civilization as the *natural* state of affairs and charges that restrictive duties 'fetter the inborn energies of man.' By linking nature and the civilizing effects of commerce, this conceptualization of geography naturalizes certain forms of relations between states as civilized and progressive.

This civilizing rhetoric was commonplace. David Urquhart, who did much to shape the character of anti-Russian sentiments in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain (Ardeleanu, 2014: 136), praised Danubian commerce as a protection against a retrogressive and protectionist Russia. Through commerce, Urquhart wrote, 'communications are opened, connections established, desires created, energies raised and progress

commences. Commerce naturally, in every case, has this effect...' (1833: 142-3). Michael Joseph Quin's 1836 account of his travels along the Danube also celebrated increased commerce and the boon it will bring to riverside populations, declaring that 'commerce, it is well known, bring blessings both physical and intellectual in her train,' and the opening of the Danube to steam travel would inevitably bring 'liberal principles among the strongholds of absolute power, or of aristocratic pride' (1836: 3). In doing so, steam will bring 'those countries, which have hitherto seemed scarcely to belong to Europe' into the 'pale of civilization' (1836: 107-8). Other accounts echoed Quin in linking safe navigation of the Danube with bringing commerce—and by extension political progress and civilization—to the East (Slade, 1840; Beattie, 1843). The Danube River, then, was the natural conduit of civilization. Authorities over the Danube had an obligation to European society to tame the river and maintain it as an open commercial highway; otherwise, it risked being portrayed as standing in the way of civilizational progress.

The lower Danube has a peculiar hydrological character: unlike rivers that rush into the sea with force in the final stretch, the Danube turns north at Cernavodă in modern Romania and slows down. At Galati, the river again turns east to enter the delta. This hydrological quirk reduces the speed of the river at this juncture and deposits sediment along the already narrow channels, making navigation particularly hazardous. Many routes twist through the wide and swampy delta, but large merchant vessels were only able to navigate the middle route known as the Sulina (or Soulina) channel. With the 1829 Treaty of Adrianople, the Danube delta came under Russian control, and it was now Russia responsibility to maintain the Danube's mouth for commerce (Geffcken, 1883: 6). Russia's inability or unwillingness to do so would shape perceptions of Russia as a civilized authority.

As early as 1829, the British foreign office under Foreign Secretary George Hamilton Gordon, 4th Earl of Aberdeen, began voicing objections against Russian control of Danubian trade (Ardeleanu, 2014: 133; *FO* 97/402: 259-61). Russia failed to control the delta on two main accounts: first in maintaining the depth of the river at the delta so that shipping could proceed; and second, in ensuring law and order in the delta. The British government even sent diplomatic emissaries to press Russian Foreign Minister Count Nesselrode for a solution to the obstacles hindering Danube shipping. Count Nesselrode assured Britain that efforts were being made to clear shipping channels, but little changed on the delta and British officials expressed skepticism as to how hard Russia tried (*FO* 7/461: no.314)<sup>11</sup>. Whether or not Russian efforts were sincere did not matter as much as the fact that these efforts failed to secure shipping in the delta, hence delegitimizing Russian territorial control over the delta. In the final years leading up to the Crimean War, the British Vice Consul at Galatz Charles Cunningham continued to complain, writing of Russian control of

the delta, 'Notwithstanding the intention of the Imperial government, it is clear that the duties assumed at Sulina have hitherto not been satisfactorily performed' (*FO 78/977*: 189).

Russia's incapacity to undertake the administrative and scientific policies necessary to discipline the delta's labyrinth of channels was linked to the chaos that purportedly dominated the delta's trading outposts. Travelers' accounts of the journey through the Danube delta complained of the lawlessness that exacerbated and compounded the river's physical dangers. Russian neglect permitted nature to gain the upper hand in hindering free trade; and in doing so, Russian neglect also impeded the trappings of civilization that naturally accompanied free commerce.

Primary accounts described Russian control over the delta as lawless, uncivilized and dangerous. The shallow depth of the shipping channel required merchants to remove weight from their ships and carry the excess cargo overland or in smaller vessels (a practice called lighterage). Lighterage not only increased transport costs but exposed merchants to extortion and piracy. Russian authorities did little to regulate the increasing traffic or impose rules on local who provided lighterage services for foreigners (Chamberlain, 1923: 35; *Correspondence* 1853). The anarchic situation was described in a lively account from a merchant in London's *The Morning Post*:

No harbour master, no regulations. Greeks, Turks, Austrians, Russians, English, and all nations jumbled together, and might is right... knives and pistols continually in requisition. Thank goodness, we are all right yet, though we have had two or three hair-breadth escapes... But I have not told you our worst predicament; the winding up of which will be that the large vessels cannot tell what their expenses will be, or when they will get over the bar. Half-a-dozen lighters to lighten 700 or 800 sails of ships, some of 400 tons. The whole place is mad (*Morning Post*, 1847).

British diplomatic personnel echoed this assessment. E. L. Butte, British Counsel at Bucharest, reported as early as 1830 on the lawless conditions on the delta: 'great obstacles thrown into the way of commerce by the irregular and arbitrary conduct of the Russian authorities' who searched some vessels more than eight times along the delta channels (*FO 97/402*: 259). Almost two decades later, Lieutenant Colonel Edward St. John Neale, British Counsel at Varna, characterized Sulina as a 'little California'—a boom town to which people flocked to get rich quickly (*FO 78/977*: 60). In addition, Butte reported that the Russians arbitrarily arrested foreigners, breaking down doors and forcing foreigners to house Russian soldiers at their own expense (*FO 97/403*: 329-32). A British merchant's account described the dangerous conditions brought by the unnecessary quarantines, and even an invasive search, as the 'barbarism of the Russian system' (*Manchester Guardian*, 1853). The language of civilizational standards and Russia's failure to uphold civilized standards permeated the narrative at all levels.



In failing to control the river, Russia was viewed as derelict in its duty as a sovereign power and member of civilized nations, and—in the eyes of the European Great Powers—forfeited authority over the area. Freedom of navigation on the Danube was a major concession required for peace negotiations to end the Crimean War. At the conferences of Vienna in 1855 and Paris in 1856, Russia's inability to discipline the Danube precipitated discussions of forming a new international body that would be capable of not only keeping nature's physical forces at bay, but willing to uphold a moral and political commitment to control the river and foster civilizational progress.

### *A Two-Way Conduit for Civilization*

Political concern over Russia's inability to control its territories and uphold its obligations under international law revealed a deeper ideological unease with the untamed river that rested at the heart of European anxiety about civilizational advancement. The Danube represented a conduit for civilization, transporting not only goods but rationality and social progress from Europe eastward. Hence, the notion that the river brought civilization to the unknown East was more than merely symbolic, it took on an embodied metaphysical quality in the swiftly flowing waters of the Danube.

The aesthetics of the Danube delta reveals much about 19<sup>th</sup> century Western European attitudes towards the far reaches of the river. While travelogues waxed poetic about the splendors of the upper Danube, travelers depicted the lower Danube and particularly the Danube delta in less than bucolic terms. In 1836, Englishman Edmund Spencer traveled down the Danube by steamboat and his portrayal of the landscape changed from sublime beauty, to lovely, to miserable desolation. Upon reaching Wallachia on the approach to the Danube delta, he lamented that one settlement was 'miserable to the extreme' and described the marshy banks of the broad river as infested with mosquitoes and sandflies making sleep impossible. Spencer goes on to write dismissively that 'throughout the whole of that immense district, notwithstanding it has the advantages of a fine climate and fertile soil adapted to every production, there was not a single object to delight the eye and gladden the heart' (1837: 81). As he enters the Danube delta, Spencer continues to depict the landscape negatively: 'as to cultivation there is none, being literally a desolation of desolation' (1837: 89). Other travelers repeatedly described the delta as 'ugly', 'dreary', 'miserable' and 'desolate' (Snow, 1842; Skene, 1847; Pardoe, 1854 [1837]; Beattie, 1844). For audiences, this language juxtaposed the 'emptiness' of the lower Danube with the splendor of the history-laden upper Danube and coded the untamed and uncultivated natural landscape as something repulsive and undesirable.

In their narratives, authors frequently offered two reasons for the lower Danube's aesthetic ugliness. First, the deserted and 'semi-barbaric' countryside is attributed to Ottoman despotism (Spencer, 1837: 80-81) or

Russian repression (Slade, 1840: 200). Second, the very uninhabited and wild state of the lower river and delta lies at the heart of its unattractiveness. In his anti-Russian tract, David Urquhart writes that the Danube ‘loses itself’ in swamps as it turns north, and ‘its useless wanderings extends a hundred and fifty miles, carrying it away from the direction of its usefulness’ (1833: 107). The uninhabited islands of the marshes, Urquhart writes, are ‘in themselves utterly valueless’ (1833: 17). When Julia Pardoe landed in a ‘wretched’ little hamlet on the Silistrian riverbank, she was surprised that ‘not the slightest attempt at a garden was visible, though the village stood upon the verge of an extensive wild’ (1854[1837]: 317). Given the fertility of the land, she could not understand why the inhabitants had not sought to improve upon nature through the medium of the garden. Here, Pardoe’s offhand remark reveals not only her English prejudices but speaks to a wider sentiment about how the delta might be improved—through human industriousness and the transformation of an ugly useless swamp into a useful and habitable transport hub. These two logics are interrelated. Uncivilized rule had barbarically squandered the potential of this fertile land, but a civilized authority would transform the delta into a rational and useful landscape—a civilizing force that flowed from Europe eastward. The argument that legitimate political authority arose from the proper use of and improvements made to land echoes justification for colonialism since the beginning of European expansion.

This uncivilized geography was dangerous not only because it threatened European trade, but because the river threatened to flow backwards, bringing irrationality to the heart of Europe. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin wrote that the Danube flowed backwards—a theme echoed by Martin Heidegger and modern Romanian poets. Indeed, unlike most rivers, the mile-markers on the Danube began at the delta and increased upriver, and apart from the German Swabians who headed downriver in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, trade, ideas and conquering armies have always flowed upriver. In this sense, the river as a human highway may be said to flow in the opposite direction as its natural course. If a river flowing from Europe outwards brings civilization, a river that flowed from outside inwards threatened to bring the opposite.

Andrew Hammond’s work building on Maria Todoravova’s scholarship argues that the Balkans represented for Europeans in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century an ‘unstable and unsettling process... where categories, oppositions, and essentialized groups are cast into confusion’. Hence, rather than a clear demarcation of civilized European self from the other as articulated in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the Balkans played a more unsettling role, presenting a ‘distorted mirror’ of the European self (Hammond, 2008: 202-4). For the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western imagination, the fog and misery of the far reaches of the Danube became transformed into a distorted reflection that continue to resonate today. The vampire, first popularized by John Polidori’s 1819 book *The Vampyre* and later stamped onto the Western imagination by Bram Stoker’s 1897 *Dracula*, hailed

from this region and represented a twisted version of the Enlightened intellect. Near the denouement of Bram Stoker's novel, the protagonists travel up the Danube by steamboat, tracking the monster to his ancestral home. Here, the delta's swamps and 'noxious fumes' takes on a supernatural quality, representing an unseen evil that expressed itself in the river's untamed characteristics. The vampire gave form to the disquieting fear that instability could travel up the Danube from the Ottoman and Russian lands and unsettle European political order. Attempts to tame the Danube delta, then, pushed back against this fear. This unease underlined the impetus of European diplomats following the Crimean War in creating a rational and scientific institution to civilize the Danube delta.

### **Constituting the Danube Commission**

The control of nature as a Standard of Civilization was central in both British disdain for Russia's inability to exercise control over the Danube delta and British outrage at Russia's failure to uphold international obligations to maintain the Danube as an avenue of free trade. However, Britain's contempt for Russia's backwardness did not remain an artifact of 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Russian rivalry. In the aftermath of British and French battlefield victories in the Crimean War, the West embedded this standard into the European Commission of the Danube, an early international body that served as a model for subsequent political projects towards international governance. Hence, controlling nature as a standard of legitimate authority became part of the technocratic language of international cooperation and part of functional assumptions that underpinned the spread of international organizations.

Ahead of the 1856 Paris Peace Conference, the major victors of the Crimea War<sup>12</sup>—France and Great Britain—stressed that free navigation of the Danube was pivotal to trade and civilization. Russian neglect amounted to forfeiture of its territorial rights over the delta. French Foreign Minister Edouard Drouyn de Lhuys sent instructions to French representative Baron de Bourquency maintaining that 'possession without control of the main mouth [of the Danube] brought, as to the navigation of this great river, moral and material obstacles, detrimental to trade of all nations' (Geffcken, 1883: 8). Similarly, Foreign Secretary the Earl of Clarendon wrote to British representative Lord Westmoreland that the allies against Russia should ensure the establishment of an independent authority to remove navigation obstacles, and that Russia should give up its rights since it has previously neglected this duty (Geffcken, 1883: 9).

Russia had failed on two interrelated fronts: first, in its internal inability to establish control over nature and therefore a failure of domestic territoriality and legitimate rule; but second, in its outward inability to maintain treaty obligations towards other states and therefore a failure in its relations with other civilized states. As has been argued, both were underpinned by civilizational ideas about the necessity of controlling

nature. If Russia's 'possession without control' created moral and material hazards, then what authority should replace Russia in managing the Danube delta?

One solution would be to allow the territorial authority to maintain the delta. While Russia insisted on its sovereign rights over the Danube, that it had always granted 'the principle of freedom of navigation for all merchant flags,' and had made efforts to remove navigation obstacles (Kaeckenbeeck, 1918: 88-9), Russia had failed for decades to tame the river. There was no indication that this behavior would change. By 1856, territorial adjustments as a result of the Crimean War meant that Russia was no longer a riparian state, and three new Danubian Principalities—Moldavia, Wallachia and Serbia—were established under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. However, European powers did not trust these newly formed states under a declining empire to carry out the task at hand. In essence, until these new states met the civilizational standard, they would not be trusted as capable actors in international society.

Alternatively, Austria proposed that Britain station ships of war at the Danube's mouth as a more effective means to guard against Russian intransigence and ensure freedom of navigation. Lord John Russell responded that ships of war would not be an appropriate remedy since 'the evils complained of are not acts of violence which the presence of a ship of war could prevent but acts of willful omission which a member of the Executive Commission could watch and demand to have remedied' (*FO 7/461*: no.273). These words highlight the river as an object of peaceful relations between civilized states and an arena for cooperation. Maintaining ships of war would effectively make the Danube delta a military object open to conflict and conquest. Instead, Russell's words paint the international river as a civilian geography to be tamed by engineers and bureaucrats that would transform the delta into an orderly and useful place. This revealing statement clarifies the Danube delta's place in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century—it constituted a commercial highway of civilized exchange between states. Its usefulness ought to be advanced through the battle to control nature, and not diminished through violent and barbaric interstate competition that benefited no one and threatened to destabilize Europe.

Finally, diplomats settled on the establishment of a European Commission to enforce navigation regulations and oversee engineering projects. At first glance, such a Commission was not a revolutionary idea. The 1815 Congress of Vienna established a joint commission on the Rhine River comprised of riparian states, and at the 1856 Paris Peace Conference, diplomats turned towards this example for the Danube. However, upon closer inspection of the historical record, the 1856 Danube Commission was innovative and would become what Leonard Woolf would later describe as the first international Executive body and a model for subsequent international government. Unlike the Rhine Commission, the Danube Commission included not

only riparian states, but Britain and France exercising joint authority over a territory half a continent away. These Great Powers gave the Commission a level of authority and independence that allowed it to rise above local political infighting, a factor which stymied the Rhine Commission and a second riparian Danube Commission.<sup>13</sup>

During negotiations, Austria objected to British and French commissioners on the river commission, arguing that according to the 1815 Vienna model, only riparian states can sit on a river commission. For Britain, this logic was unacceptable. The body required British and French commissioners to ensure its impartiality and competence. In a note from British diplomat Lord John Russell to Austrian diplomat Count Karl Ferdinand von Buol in March 1855, Russell wrote:

Her Majesty's government can well understand why Russia who has always prevented the removal of obstructions to the free navigation of the Danube should object to English and French Commissioners, who would carefully watch her proceedings, but the ground on which Austria joins in and supports the objections of Russia is not intelligible (*FO 7/461*: no.273).

Russell goes further to argue in an April 1855 letter that given differences in circumstances, the Treaty of Vienna 'is no longer the rule' and the commission 'ought to contain an English and French Member because England and France are deeply interested in having the channels of the River kept free and open' (*PRO 30/22/18/4*: no.40). When debates heated up in 1856, the British representative even charged that Austria wanted Europe to clear the delta's channels for the sole benefit of Austrian trade (*FO 27/1169*: 4-7). Under intense diplomatic pressure, the Austrian Emperor acquiesced.

Hence, the Danube Commission was not simply a continuation of the Rhine Commission model but a new model of international cooperation. Its subsequent success hinged on the Commission's ability to 'exercise its functions in complete independence of the territorial authorities' (Blackburn, 1930: 1154), giving credence to functional approaches to international governance. Behind the Danube Commission's functional success, however, stood the underlying assumption that international society's civilizational achievements should be grounded on the control and useful exploitation of nature. Functionalism became part of neoliberal 'social myths' that obscured emergent conflicts stemming from the expansion of industrial relations (Murphy, 1994). One of these conflicts, I argue here, pitted a cooperative liberal international society against nature, a conflict that continues to play out in today's international politics.

The paradox here is that the Danube Commission's success was a mirage. The Danube delta's complex hydraulics confounded simple engineering solutions or a permanent fix (Ardeleanu, 2014). Hence, river rectification plans begot further plans extending the life of the 'temporary' European Commission until it

became permanent. The river itself pushed back against being tamed and civilized. Despite the representation of its mission as a simple and rational matter of clearing shipping channels and introducing law and order, built into the Danube Commission was a dose of technological hubris with path-dependent consequences that ensured the body's longevity and continued relevance.

### **Conclusion: Embedded Standards**

The 1856 Danube Commission, through its independence and perceived scientific success, represented an innovation in nascent 19<sup>th</sup> century steps towards international governance. This functional and technocratic body, however, was laden with ideological baggage. As this article has contended, embedded within the Danube Commission was the control of nature as a civilizational standard. Rooted in the Enlightenment mindset that scientific mastery over the natural world will achieve civilizational progress, control over nature emerged as an international political standard that separated civilized from noncivilized societies. This hierarchy, based on a society's ability to command nature, operated through the dual mechanisms of maintaining internal territoriality and upholding external obligations towards other states under international law. When states failed to uphold this standard, as the Russians had in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century on the Danube delta, an international body headed by the most 'civilized' nations was constituted to intervene and maintain this standard for the benefit of the international community. Russia's failure involved both its inability to control the natural hydrology of the Danube delta, as well as the lawlessness and moral chaos that reigned—indeed the untamed natural and moral characteristics of the delta were intertwined in portrayals of the river delta as backwards and uncivilized. This failure to exercise territorial control also amounted to Russia's failure to meet its international obligations, particularly with respect to maintaining free trade under international law. Hence, the international body that replaced Russia was expected to subdue the Danube delta and render the river's mouth conducive to global commerce—and the body would do so through technocratic confidence in engineers and bureaucrats to control the river, and in the process, tame the excesses of international political competition.

In analyzing the 19<sup>th</sup> century contest over the Danube delta, this article has highlighted two important implications of examining the domination and exploitation of nature as a civilizational standard. First, while recent reevaluations of the Standards of Civilization have moved away from a Eurocentric, unidirectional account of the spread of civilizational order from Western Europe outward, hence creating more nuanced accounts of the context-specific globalization of international society, limited scholarship in IR has examined the link between society's relationship with the natural world and the construction of civilizational standards to order that world. By focusing on the transboundary river as a conduit of civilization, this article illuminates a part of this link between foreign spaces and the development of

international order in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, more in-depth scholarship is required to further expound upon how political geography and IR scholarship might engage in fruitful conversation.

Second, this article outlines one avenue through which Standards of Civilization remains relevant beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century—through their inclusion in assumptions that underpin international organizations. In doing so, this article reveals the underlying civilizational assumptions embedded in international organizations and highlights the ideational scaffolding behind seemingly technocratic and apolitical bodies. Research on the current international order and the state of international organizations is often characterized by a presentist bias where the political structures studied are subject to a dislocated sense of universality divorced from context. Further engagement with historical context in IR is necessary to fully comprehend the ideational framework behind our seemingly objective and ahistorical political structures and worldviews.

The control and exploitation of nature as a Standard of Civilization remains important in international politics today through the dual mechanisms of internal territorial control and external obligations under international law. In the late 2000s, Somalia's inability to maintain control over territorial waters and protect international shipping from piracy de-legitimized its authority. International society ostracized Somalia as a 'failed state' in need of intervention by more civilized and rational powers. Ambitious construction projects such as China's Three Gorges Dam and Ethiopia's Grand Renaissance Dam are designed to showcase civilizational greatness and international prestige through the exploitation of great rivers for human benefit. The control of nature as a civilizational standard, however, does not only frame debates on state sovereignty and territorial legitimacy in the periphery. Conflicting claims over the Arctic and Antarctic are predicated on sovereign states' control of territory and thereby resource exploitation at the expense of native peoples and the natural environment. The United States' recalcitrant position in its standoff with Native Americans over the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 reflected a certain notion of the sovereign state's legitimate right, and even duty, to control and exploit natural resources in the service of global commerce. Unrecognized political groupings had no grounds on which to challenge this right—a right which was usurped from the Native Americans in the first place based on arguments relegating certain types of land use as less civilized and therefore less legitimate. Further explorations into the link between the control of nature and conceptual frameworks that underpin international order can help us continue to unpack modern international society's troubled relationship with the natural world.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

I wish to thank George Lawson, Tonny Brems Knudsen, and Peter Wilson, as well as the Editors and anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and helpful recommendations.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While the 1815 Rhine Commission is often identified as the first intergovernmental organization (Reinalda, 2009: 28), there is the sense that it was not truly international. As Lyons stresses, while the Rhine Commission included riparian states, 'it was not international in the wider connotation of the term' (1963: 58).

<sup>2</sup> For Mill, different sets of rules applied to civilized and non-civilized groups, most clearly outlined in his 'A Few Words on Non-Intervention' which reserved the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs only for civilized nations. A different standard applied for non-civilized nations because firstly, non-civilized societies could not engage in reciprocity, and secondly, these nations would benefit from foreign guidance (Jahn, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The Danube Commission flew its own flag and appointed its own officials who took an oath to the Commission rather than to any territorial authority.

<sup>4</sup> They include Count George Buffon (1797–1807), George Perkins Marsh (1865), Sigmund Freud (1928), David Blackburn (2006), and Peter Coates (2013) just to name a few.

<sup>5</sup> These mechanisms reflect Bull and Watson's analysis of how the Standards of Civilization was applied—based on a polity's ability to demonstrate legitimate domestic institutions and its ability to uphold international obligations.

<sup>6</sup> For a point of difference on humanity's attitudes towards nature, see Thomas (1984).

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<sup>7</sup> ‘When the Danube is at its ordinary height, replenished by its usual tributaries, the roar of its waters, in hurrying through the “Iron Gate,” is borne on the winds for many miles around, like the sound of continued peals of thunder’ (Quin, 1836: 122).

<sup>8</sup> This attempt actually backfired as the redirected currents created new navigational dangers and required additional treatments of gunpowder (Coates, 2013: 51).

<sup>9</sup> Slade speculates that the Ottomans were ‘influenced by Russia’ and ‘determined to refuse leave.’

<sup>10</sup> For example, Immanuel Kant’s *Perpetual Peace* (1795), Condorcet’s *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Spirit* (1795), David Hume’s *Political Discourses* (1777), Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and John Stuart Mill’s *Essays* (1836) all stressed the positive ideological link between free trade, peace, and civilizational progress.

<sup>11</sup> Despite British skepticism, Russian efforts seemed sincere. For example, in 1845, Count Nesselrode sent inspectors to investigate the Military Governor of Bessarabia, General Pavel Ivanovici Fedorov, to resolve the lawlessness of the Danube delta. In 1847, Tsar Nicholas I personally sent another investigator. However, these inspectors were unable to resolve the administrative corruption that ran deep (Ardeleanu 2014: 170).

<sup>12</sup> The Crimean War 1853-6 highlighted the dominant political fissures of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe including the Ottoman Empire’s decline, intensifying geopolitical competition between Britain and Russia over the Black Sea region and Central Asia, national consolidation and liberation movements that created new players in European politics, and the explosive tension between the older European order and new revolutionary nationalism. The three-year conflict pitted Russia against the Ottomans in alliance with France, Britain and Sardinia. Allied military victory set the scene for the 1856 Paris Peace Treaty. Austria’s reluctance to enter the war diminished its leverage in the post-war settlement.

<sup>13</sup> The European Commission was established to govern the Danube delta. The 1856 Paris agreement established a second river commission comprised of riparian states to govern the upper Danube. It ended in political stalemate and was eventually dissolved.